

Today we honor our fathers. That’s good because Dads don’t get much respect nowadays. A doting father used to sing his children to sleep. He even learned a few lullabies to lend some variety to the task. This was something he could do for the kids at night after a long workday. He kept up this routine until one night he overheard his four-year-old give her younger sibling some advice, “If you pretend you’re asleep,” she said, “he’ll stop.” That was it for the lullabies.

Little Alice Thompson lived with her father and mother in rural southern Illinois. Besides a house and a tool shed, the other building on their small acreage was a chicken coop where the egg-laying hens roosted. When young Alice found some matches, she took them into the chicken coop to see if she could figure out how to strike one. She figured out alright and she held the burning wooden matchstick until it got too hot, but then dropped it. Instead of burning out, the bit of flame fell on a piece of straw, which came alive with fire. Determined that no one would find out about the matches, Alice covered the flame with readily available material—a handful of straw. For a minute, it seemed to work, but then the pile began to smolder. She decided to smother the whole thing, so she scooped up a pitchfork of straw to bury the evidence once and for all. Satisfied that she had finally taken care of the matter, she ran out into the yard to play. Soon after that the chicken coop burned to the ground.

In the book of Acts, the high priest saw a fire and wanted to get it under control. He was supposed to be the central religious figure of the day. He was the keeper of God—not these upstart followers of Jesus. The high priest was a busy man. He had a demanding job mainly managing the Temple and keeping the Roman authorities at bay. The Romans were provoked when any civil disturbance happened. It was the high priest’s job to keep them appeased.

This whole incident with Jesus had been a threat. There was too much civil unrest. That march into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday bordered on anarchy. The high priest thought that burying Jesus seemed like the best solution. When he

was done with Jesus, he would be done with civil unrest and unruly crowds. By eliminating Jesus, he could get back to the business of being high priest.

But as it turned out, it seemed like he had merely buried the match under the straw. Three days of calm were followed by pesky claims that Jesus was not dead but alive. Rumors flew around Jerusalem. Smoke rose from the straw and threatened to burst into open flames again. It had been 50 days, and now at Pentecost the smoke got worse. Peter and the other disciples were preaching boldly in the Temple, healing the sick and teaching that there is the resurrection from the dead through Jesus. Peter even said, *“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12).

Maybe the worst part was that these men were uneducated and ordinary men. They were not trained in the Temple, they did not know orthodox teaching, they had no degrees, and they were not approved teachers. They were only tutored under this itinerant Rabbi Jesus for three years. So, the high priest put some straw on the flames. He arrested Peter and John, reprimanded them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. He assumed that a direct order from the highest religious authority in Jerusalem should be enough to shut them up.

*But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard”* (4:19-20). The high priest didn’t like that answer—at all. But finding no reason to keep these two in prison, he let them go, assuming this new pile of straw had solved the problem. One chapter later, there was smoke again. Now all twelve of the disciples were teaching the same things in the Temple! These upstart Christians were not good listeners. He told them to stop that nonsense! He let Peter and John off with just a reprimand, and that obviously was not enough. The high priest was determined not to make the same mistake again. So, he arrested the whole lot of them, and threw them in prison. There! A whole wagon load of straw would solve the problem for sure!

But the prison locks were no match for the Holy Spirit. During the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. *“Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life”* (v. 20), which they promptly did. The council of the Sanhedrin gathered the next morning ready to throw the book at the disciples of Jesus, so they sent someone to the prison to bring them out. The temple police hustled off to the dungeon of the prison and came back with an amazing story: *“We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside”* (5:23). The temple police and the Sanhedrin were perplexed about this, and wondered what on earth was going on! But at that very moment a man arrived from the Temple and announced, *“Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people”* (5:25).

This was stunning (and disturbing) news. Not only had these men escaped from a well-guarded jail, but instead of fleeing for their safety, they immediately continued their preaching right in the middle of the temple courtyard. It was a blatant affront to the power of the high priest! But the high priest was in a very tough spot now! Look how popular these men and their message had become. The crowds were not only impressed with the miraculous escape from prison, but they were believing their message about the Risen Jesus!

The high priest knew he could not deal too harshly with the disciples because of the crowds. So, the escaped prisoners were gingerly escorted back to yet another full meeting of the Sanhedrin. When the disciples stood before the high priest, he said, *“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood”* (5:28).

Notice that the high priest refuses to say the name of “Jesus” as he berates his captives and scolds them for their disobedience. It was out of contempt for Jesus, but it was also a means of trying to keep the Sanhedrin members at arm’s length from the power of that name (as we saw last week)! The high priest levels two accusations at the apostles. First, *“you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching”* (5:28). It was carefully worded to suggest that what the

disciples teach is their own, not Jesus' message. Second, the disciples were accused of a vendetta against the authorities for their role in Jesus' arrest and execution. Verse 28 says, you "*are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.*" But the high priest was actually weakening because he was now verbalizing the thought that already crossed everyone's mind.

For Peter and John, this is round two. They had faced the Sanhedrin on the same charges and with the same warnings before. For the rest of the apostles, this is their first experience standing before the Council. When the high priest forbids Peter to witness, he might as well have been ordering him not to breathe. Peter takes his role as voice of the disciples seriously. He replies, "*We must obey God rather than human beings*" (5:29). What a choice! By portraying their decision in those terms, Peter was harkening back to the long history of Israel that is filled with stories of men and women who bravely obeyed God rather than their human rulers. How could the Sanhedrin possibly argue with such a choice?

Then in verses 30-32 Peter summarizes the gospel in a few lines: "*The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.*" Peter strongly asserts that God raised up Jesus. That is, the same *God of their ancestors*. The story of Jesus is a part of the ongoing salvation story of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Once again Peter asserts that these Jewish leaders killed Jesus and adds that they killed him by "*hanging him on a cross,*" a phrase taken directly from Deuteronomy 21:23, which says, "*...for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse.*" Peter knows that part of the reason behind the chant of the crowd to "crucify him" was so the religious authorities could point to the manner of Jesus' death, recite this verse from Deuteronomy and proclaim Jesus "cursed."

But instead, Peter proclaims that God has exalted Jesus and made him leader and Savior. Peter is more concerned with testifying about the wondrous good

news of the Savior than he is in fixing blame for Jesus' death. Peter is saying that even the members of the Sanhedrin must seek Jesus as their Savior if they want to experience the repentance and forgiveness God would offer Israel.

Verse 33 says, *“When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.”* The council is enraged to the point of wanting to silence Peter forever, as they thought they had silenced Jesus. They are politicians who fear a loss of power and credibility, as well as repercussions from Rome. They are the officials of faith, and do not take kindly to being upstaged in the realm of faith. Killing Peter could solve the problem of his filling Jerusalem with impassioned teaching and relieve the building pressure of their rage.

But a few verses later, and in the end, the levelheaded and historically aware Pharisee Gamaliel prevails. He says, *“Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men... Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”* (5:35, 38 & 39).

He recognized that this criminal was not a common thief, and that in time one of two things would happen. The chicken coop could be reduced to ashes and lost to memory, or the fire would spread, refusing to burn itself out. It was beyond the power of the high priest to determine the outcome. The high priest had lost. No matter how much straw he doused on this fire, the flames kept coming back. He could only flog the accused, scold them and release them. They were ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus again!

The apostles left the Sanhedrin and were barely out the door when they were *“rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name (of Jesus).”* Chapter five ends with this line: *“Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.”* Let us hope and pray that our story ends the same way—because we chose to obey God. Amen.

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